

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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NOW PLAYING AT A NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE NEAR YOU: AN OUTSTANDING WINTER WILDLIFE SHOW--NO ADMISSION CHARGE!

Each waterfowl species calls in its own particular voice, and together they raise a tumultuous clamor. A sky full of mallards swirl downward and disappear among the tawny reaches of cattails and rushes. Diminutive teal ducks do quick turns, flip-overs, and other aerial stunts. Redheads and canvasbacks buzz by in tight, swift vees. Long, clanging chains of Canada geese festoon the bleak winter horizon. But the snow geese always steal the show with their famous "snowstorm act," fluttering en masse by the thousands from great heights into the marsh.

Now is the time to see this great annual pageant on many of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's refuges and at numerous State wildlife management areas. Several refuges have interpretive motor routes or trails with specified observation points. Some have blinds for bird watchers and photographers. A few even conduct special tours. All refuges have rules for visitors to follow on the area which are available from the manager, but none charge admission.

Take along binoculars, camera, and lunch. Come early and plan to stay until dusk so that the waterfowl can be seen leaving and returning on feeding flights.

Many of the ducks have just arrived from the prairie potholes of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and the Dakotas; geese from the shores of the Hudson Bay, the tundra marshes of the Northwest Territories, Alaska, and from as far as northeastern Siberia.

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These "northerns," as they are frequently called, are said to be larger, stronger, and noisier than their more sedentary local relatives. But they aren't. There are just more of them. In normal years about 100 million ducks and from 4 to 6 million geese return to their wintering grounds.

Due to a severe drought in the northern plains where most of the ducks are hatched, and late snows in the far north nesting grounds of the geese, waterfowl numbers are down this year. But large enough concentrations are on marshes all across the central and southern parts of the lower 48 States to put on a good show.

At Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia's coastal marshes, both the brant and the snow geese are at peak numbers as are many other species of waterfowl. In addition to the regular numbers of waterfowl at Muscatatuck Refuge in Indiana, there are 250 giant Canada geese. Large numbers of waterfowl are at Crab Orchard in Illinois, at Flint Hills and Kirwin refuges in Kansas, across the Rocky Mountains at Bear River in Utah and Willapa on the Pacific Coast in Washington, and the dozens of refuges in the southern half of the Nation.

A million ducks and 400,000 geese can be expected at the Sacramento Refuge complex in California. Similar numbers winter on southern refuges such as Sabine in Louisiana. At Mattamuskeet in North Carolina there is the largest concentration of whistling swans (up to 30,000) in the lower 48 States.

Nor is the show completely over in the North. Many geese and quite a few ducks remain on the northern marshes in spite of the ice and cold. Pheasants, grouse and in some places wild turkeys can be seen in their brightest plumage. The leafless trees make for easy viewing of eagles, hawks, owls, woodpeckers, kinglets, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, grosbeaks, redpolls, snow buntings and other hardy birds of the North.

On rare occasions, snowy owls make a dramatic appearance south of the Canadian border.

Comic relief may be provided when a pair of ravens approach opposite ends of a bald eagle who happens to be guarding an uneaten fish. While one distracts the national symbol, the other drags the fish as far as he can before the theft is discovered. Then the routine is reversed. It is pure slapstick.

There is no admission cost, but the show is not free. Most of the wetlands that make these performances possible are purchased with money accrued through the sale of MIGRATORY BIRD HUNTING AND CONSERVATION STAMPS, or "Duck Stamps" as they are called. Anyone who enjoys waterfowl can purchase one of the beautifully designed pieces of art for \$7.50 at most post offices and some of the national wildlife refuges.

As more nesting habitat is lost to cropland and urban development in the North, and more swamps are logged off and converted to similar purposes in the southern waterfowl wintering grounds, America's system of national wildlife refuges must carry an ever increasing burden--or the show will certainly close.

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Snow geese fill the sky over
a southern wintering grounds.
(U.S. Fish and Wildlife Ser-
vice photograph)

